



---

**Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past***

Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, 455 pp.

**Wu Weiyi**

---



**Édition électronique**

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6331>

DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6331

ISSN : 1996-4617

**Éditeur**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 1 décembre 2013

Pagination : 78-79

ISSN : 2070-3449

**Référence électronique**

Wu Weiyi, « Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2013/4 | 2013, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2013, consulté le 22 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6331> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6331>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 22 septembre 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*

Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, 455 pp.

Wu Weiyi

---

- 1 Gail Hershatter's book *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* is based on more than one decade of research she carried out with Gao Xiaoxian (高小贤), a native of their research site, Shaanxi Province, and both a research office director of the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation and Secretary General of the Shaanxi Research Association for Women and Family. When the two first met in Beijing in 1992, they discovered a common interest in early socialism in rural China and dissatisfaction with the lack of women's voice on that issue. The result was this research project, which aims to unveil and understand rural women's accounts of a series of intervening events (land reform, collectivisation, implementation of the Marriage Law, the Great Leap Forward, and the famine) that profoundly influenced their lives, through the collection and analysis of the relevant memories narrated by these rural women.



- 2 As qualified historians, Hershatter and Gao laid the foundation of their research on extensive and meticulous archival work, and they benefitted greatly from facilities and access provided by local governments and the Shaanxi Provincial Women's Federation. Nevertheless, due to their reservations about the incompleteness of official history (pp. 3 and 287), they put a greater emphasis on women's own voices, namely, their oral narratives. Beginning in 1996, Hershatter and Gao interviewed 72 rural women in different villages in four counties in Shaanxi Province (pp. 289-91), whom they revisited repeatedly over the course of ten years (1996-2006). In doing so, the two researchers kept a longitudinal record of those rural women, and eventually Hershatter published this monograph, in which she addresses her research questions on the correlation between women's life trajectories and rural socialism (p. 6), based on her interpretation of their life stories.
- 3 As indicated by the title of this book, its core consists of three elements: rural women, memory, and socialism. Combining any two of the three elements allows readers to generalise the key themes of this book: rural women's memory, rural women's socialism, and memory of socialism. In the Introduction of this book, Hershatter explains the "rough chronology" that outlines the framework of her arrangement of those life stories (pp. 8-12). The following ten chapters comprise the main body of this book in which she compares and articulates the three key themes with skilful analysis of rural women's oral narratives.
- 4 Among the three themes, rural women's memory is the one that runs through the whole book. It is both the main resource and the direct object of Hershatter's research. This subtle difference often gets blurred, as Hershatter's writing could easily make readers overlook the fact that while retelling those fascinating stories, she is also expressing her reflections on the gendered memory and its historical, structural, and psychological factors. Therefore, rather than simply being curious listeners, readers are required to be reflexive researchers so as to fully appreciate implications that Hershatter decodes from the content, texture, and context of these oral narratives.<sup>1</sup>
- 5 The second theme – rural women's socialism – leads directly to the key question of this research: what is women's role in socialism, and how/why is socialism gendered? Hershatter addresses these questions from different aspects when she discusses different issues in specific chapters. For instance, in "Chapter 3: Widow" and "Chapter 4: Activist," she focuses on the early 1950s (most of the interviewees' early youth) and demonstrates how living space for those rural women was reconfigured while boundaries between the state, their villages, and their kinship were becoming blurred mainly due to land reform and the Marriage Law. Then chapters 5, 8, and 9 (from the mid-1950s to early 1960s) show the gradual disappearance of the domestic realm for rural women under the impact of collectivisation, the Great Leap Forward and the famine. From a less historical but more feminist perspective, Hershatter discusses the issue of the domestic realm in "Chapter 6: Midwife" and "Chapter 7: Mother." She argues that the liberation of women from domestic obligations did not in fact free them from heavy housework but rather discredited women's contributions to family economy and rural construction. Moreover, she suggests that the gender division of labour and devaluation of domestic work together have had long-term effects on rural women's "double marginalised" status in today's society.
- 6 While wrapping up the whole book in "Chapter 10: Narrator," Hershatter comes back to the earlier conclusion of "double marginalised" status. She highlights "pitiful" (*keliande*

可怜的) – a recurring term in the interviewees' narratives – and summarises the causes of this persistent feeling at different stages of rural women's lives. Based on her comparison between rural women's situation in the collective era (gender inequality) and that in the economic reform era (elder neglect), she concludes that the domestic realm has become "a realm of marginalisation of many elderly women" (p. 277) while socially acknowledged notions of gender/woman were stripped away at critical historical junctures.<sup>2</sup>

- 7 Focusing on the disappearance and return of the domestic realm – a significant transformation in these rural women's lives – Hershatter expands readers' understanding of China's collective past by restoring village women's lived socialism. The 72 women's narratives not only prove that socialism is indeed gendered, but also illustrate how a gendered perspective could provide historians with more details and emotions as well as new themes and arguments. However, at the conclusion of this book, Hershatter also points out that gender is only one of the useful categories of analysis and that "it needs to be understood as one in an array of powerful relationships" (p. 287). This nuanced attitude shows that Hershatter has been inspired and enabled rather than constrained by her feminist perspective.
- 8 In relation to the third theme, memory of socialism, the critical question is: what could (not) memory tell us about socialism? Here, Timothy Mitchell's influence becomes quite obvious.<sup>3</sup> "All socialism is local" (pp. 13-15) cannot be fully justified if local people's experiences and understandings are excluded from the historiography of socialism. This is where "dry facts" such as statistics, annals, and official documents lose their explanatory power. In this regard, the combination of the first two themes, rural women's memory of socialism, gives concrete details about the construction of socialism at fragmented and diversified local levels. In this sense, the main chapters of this book (Chapter 2 to Chapter 9) not only present a timeline of "China's collective past" from pre-1949 to the early 1960s, but also show readers how a local sense of state and socialism was produced and embodied from rural women's perspectives. According to Hershatter, women, who tend to disaggregate events into concrete details in daily life, provide especially abundant narratives and participatory descriptions of what they contributed to, what they were involved in, and what made them who they are.
- 9 Just a step away from socialism, "memory" in this book involves a theoretical and methodological question about the legitimacy of using oral narratives in historical studies. In the Introduction, Hershatter reviews the difficulties she had in maintaining the balance between a historian's position and an anthropologist's position. Long references relevant to discussions on memory, narratives, and other related topics indicate the influences she received from philosophy, politics, sociology, psychology, literary theory, and other disciplines.
- 10 Hershatter's attitude is that archives and narratives are equally messy and contaminated; thus their legitimacy lies not in purity but in efficacy (how informative they are) and depends very much on each historian's purpose, concentration, and interpretation. This reflects the feminist questioning of a "pure," single, and trustworthy historiography. Of course, theoretical and methodological issues should always be open for discussion, for this is where creations such as the interdisciplinary approach emerge. Readers who are interested in "memory" will find inspiring books and articles on this controversial topic in the References of this book (pp. 411-41).

- 11 Reading this book is an eye-opening experience even for a Chinese reader. As Hershatter notes, her research group is a doubly marginalised group that has been invisible and unheard for a long time. For readers who still remember the heat of Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls*, this could be seen as its prequel in the sense that *The Gender of Memory* explains where those factory girls came from, although the latter book is more academically sophisticated.
- 12 In addition to whetting readers' curiosity, this book is a contribution to the field of early socialism in rural China – the primary question that initiated this research. In those ten years, the two researchers lost some of their interviewees, and Hershatter appeals for more attention to this research area as this particular memory is diminishing daily as the specific generation ages. In both the social and academic sense, this book will serve its purpose if more researchers are inspired to raise more questions on women, rural China, and other related issues.
- 

## NOTES

1. An interesting example is that Hershatter's female interviewees were less capable than male interviewees of accurately remembering the years of political events. Hershatter argues that this is closely related to the effect of gender division of labour on women's sense of time. In allusion to this, Hershatter and Gao adopted pictures of 12 zodiac animals to supplement the normal calendar, which was well received by their interviewees (Figure 1).
2. A typical example, as pointed out by Hershatter, is that "a filial daughter-in-law" was a social criterion for "a good/capable woman" when her interviewees married into their husbands' families, while today's daughters-in-law are oriented towards their small families and are no longer bound by the old social standard. This could be attributed to the cyclical migration of rural young male labourers and the rise of nuclear families, which are significant changes in the era of economic reform.
3. Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, No. 1 (March), 1991, pp. 77-96.